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# Cruising to see the ice pack and a land of polar bears

## Hurtigruten cruise ship takes visitors 800 miles from North Pole

BY ANNE Z. COOKE, TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE : MARCH 18, 2015

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LONGYEARBYEN, Svalbard — If it weren't for the red flags marking the tundra trail to the glacier, some of us — passengers on the Hurtigruten cruise ship MS Fram, sailing out of Spitsbergen — might have been tempted to leave the slowpokes behind and bushwhack across country.

But as newcomers are relentlessly reminded here in Svalbard Archipelago, where white is the new black, that polar bears are the **Big Dogs**. More numerous than humans (3,500 to 2,750) and a protected species, the bears have the run of the islands, 24,209 square miles of wilderness, just 800 miles from the North Pole. Curious, stealthy and fast on their feet, they're not fussy about their food.

"You may think polar bears are cute," warned the Fram's expedition leader **Corinna Skringo** before our first shore excursion, fixing a stern eye on a couple wearing cuddly-bear shirts. "But they are lethal," she said, slinging her rifle over her shoulder. "We're all trained in the use of firearms, but killing a bear is the very last option. If we spot a bear sitting on the beach or even on the next ridge, we go to Plan B."

Plan A, our first shore excursion, began when the 318-passenger Fram sailed into the Hornsund Inlet and the crew landed in Burgerbukta Bay to reconnoiter. Scanning the slopes with binoculars, they flagged the safest trails, chose a landing site on the beach and radioed the "all clear" to the bridge. Then with rifles slung on their backs, they stood guard while the ship's PolarCirkels (six-passenger inflatable landing craft) ferried everyone to shore.

The MS Fram, built in 2007, is Hurtigruten's newest ship, with eight decks, small but efficient cabins, an inviting restaurant, a snack bar, two lecture rooms, and adjacent lounges with big windows. When the outside decks are too cold, passengers retreat to the Qilak Observation Lounge on Deck 7, where upholstered chairs and panoramic windows bring outside in. Also on this deck the bar, fitness center, hot tubs and the outdoor sun deck.

Since the Spitsbergen cruise's port stops are limited, each day's activities depend more on chance than on the clock. Prowling the sea for sights might yield a bird rookery, a reindeer herd, arctic foxes, whales, scenic glaciers or unusual geologic formations. Meals are regular, but shore excursions are always flexible.

But we arrived a day early and discovered that as bare though it looks, Longyearbyen — and Svalbard — are more utopia than outlier. Administered by Norway, Svalbard is an international territory where citizens whose countries signed the 1920 Treaty of Versailles can live and work. Thus there is a global seed bank, numerous research stations, a concentration on the Arctic and

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related sciences — climate change, geology, astrophysics and biology.

"This is a fantastic place to live," said **Anika Paust**, with Hurtigruten International Sales. "We've got 42 nationalities represented, and people are interesting because they're doing science. Everyone's between 25 and 40 so businesses cater to a younger crowd. There are lots of great bars and restaurants and no retirees because there's no senior housing or low-cost services for the elderly. You can play in nature all day and come back for a party night out with your friends."

But there are rules, she explained. To stay here you have to be self-supporting. There's no welfare and no jail, so undesirables are simply deported.

Booking it: Hurtigruten's MS Fram sails the nine-day (seven-night) cruise, "In the Realm of the Polar Bear," on five dates in July and August, 2015: July 22 and 29 and Aug. 5, 12 and 19. Cabin prices start at \$5,365 per person and include all meals, snacks, coffee bar, guided hikes, kayaking, glacier walks, onboard entertainment and airport transports. Wine, beer and bar drinks not included. At [www.hurtigruten.com](http://www.hurtigruten.com).

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